

9

Kassaka Sutta

The Discourse on the Farmer | S 4.19

Theme: Māra as our senses

Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2011, 2013

1 Sutta highlights**1.1 TWO VIEWS OF MĀRA**

1.1.0 The Kassaka Sutta is a short but intense dialogue between the Buddha and Māra, the mythical archetype of badness (just as Brahmā¹ is the mythical archetype of goodness in this world).² How we view Māra profoundly affects our view of Buddhism and how we practise the Dharma (if we do at all). For the purposes of our discussion, let us narrow down our views of Māra into two ways: the historical and the psychological, that is, whether he “really” exists or he is “the mind.”

1.1.1 Historical view. Most traditional Buddhists probably view Māra as a historical figure (like the Buddha). After all, we have sutta accounts where he actually approaches not just the Bodhisattva,³ but also the Buddha.⁴ In other words, he appears to one awakened. Here again, this is the case if we take such sutta stories as *historical* accounts, that is, to say he exists the way you and I exist.

Such a view of Māra is problematic, because he is seen as an external being, like the God-idea. Suttas and teachings where appear figures are no more taken as teachings but as an ancient event that no more applies to us today (like the stories of the Greek gods and demons). Or if we do *believe* in such an idea, it is likely to be ridden with fear and superstition

1.1.2 Psychological view. On the other hand, if we are to benefit in any way from the Dharma as a method of personal development or Buddhism as spiritual practice, then the appreciation of Māra as a psychological construct, or even as a myth, would be more spiritually engaging and life-changing. For, if we accept that Māra is *within* ourselves, that Māra, for example are our own sense-faculties, how they create us and how we deal with them, then we have a more usefully workable conception of personal psychology and, when applied more broadly, as social psychology.

If Māra is our own eye, ear, nose, tongue, and body, and their respective sense-experiences, then we are more concerned with how they shape our lives. We would find efforts in moral cultivation meaningful since Māra is an intimate part of our own being, and purposeful, that is, we can and should ourselves cultivate our body and speech.

If Māra is also our mind, then it is easier to understand our weaknesses and failures, as being due to our own ignorance and craving. For, it is Māra who wants to habitually keep us ever in the blindness of ignorance and rut of craving. Yet, we know that we can and should know our own minds, shape them and free them through mindfulness and meditation, we know that we can take charge of our own lives and destiny. Indeed, to believe that Māra is a powerful historical being who wield supreme over us would be a self-defeating belief that resigns us to determinism: we simply blame it all on Māra! Instead, the whole idea of the Buddha Dharma is that we can and must take charge of our own lives.⁵

1.2 MĀRA IN THE KASSAKA SUTTA. The Sutta opens with the Buddha “instructing, inspiring, rousing and gladdening⁶ the monks with a talk connected with nirvana,” and the monk are “all ears, attentively, intently applying all their mind, listening to the Dharma” [§1]. It is a perfect teaching and learning sit-

¹ On Brahmā, see SD 11.17 (5+6); SD 12.1 (2.3.4).

² Cf C G Jung’s archetypes of the shadow and the wise old man, which are clearly reminiscent of Māra and Brahmā respectively: <http://psychology.about.com/od/personalitydevelopment/tp/archetypes.htm>. On analytical psychology, attachment theory and archetypes, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jungian_archetypes with basic biblio.

³ Eg he urges the Bodhisattva to give up self-mortification (Sn 427 f); more often in Comys, eg he tries to terrify the Bodhisattva under the Bodhi tree (J 1:72 f).

⁴ Eg Māra invites the Buddha to pass away, **Mahā,parinibbāna S** (D 16,3.7-8), SD 9; Māra blinds the brahmas or high gods, **Brahma,nimantanika S** (M 49,29-31), SD 11.7.

⁵ For a more detailed study, see **Māra**, SD 61.8.

⁶ See §1n.

uation. However, this probably happens in an open-air situation in park with neither wall nor fence. A straggling comes along, looking for his lost oxen, and asking the Buddha about them. Such an event would historically merely be a distraction, but to a sutta narrator or religious story-teller (like a modern story-writer or dramatist), this serves as a great departure for presenting the Dharma in a more interesting and engaging way. The rude and rustic farmer becomes Māra the distracter (like someone with a ringing handpone in a Dharma talk, and he nonchalantly answers it right there).

Perhaps, the Buddha himself decides, after closing his teaching on nirvana, to go on to talk on Māra (in his characteristic humourous way). As if telling us not to mind the rude and rustic farmer, but to understand that distraction is when our senses are in disarray and our minds astray.

Māra's words [§6] must have been uttered apostrophically by the Buddha (playing the role of Māra, as it were), claiming that all the six senses belong to Māra. The meaning here is that if we are distracted, then we have "lost" our senses to Māra. The Buddha's own response that our senses are our world; so, they belong to Māra. To get rid of Māra, we must renounce the world, but what does this really mean?

However, the renunciants, even when robed, are still troubled by Māra. As such, the Buddha is speaking of a higher level of renunciation, that is, the letting go of the "all" of our sense-constructings and transcending even our own selves [§§7-12]. Interestingly, we do not need to become monks or nuns to renounce the world, that is, if we wisely meditate, or practice proper mindfulness, as instructed in this Sutta.

Hence, after each verse, there is the refrain (the key teaching here): "But, bad one (*pāpimā*), where there is no <sense-faculty>, no <sense-object>, no <sense-contact> and its consciousness-base, you cannot go there, bad one!" This is one of those teachings of the Buddha where he declares that Māra is blinded by meditation, especially dhyana [5].

1.3 MĀRA AS CRAVING. The two closing verses give the essence of the whole sutta teaching in a contrapuntal manner: we hear the voices of both Māra and the Buddha, as it were. If we think in terms of "I," "me" and "mine"—in terms of self, appropriating and possessiveness—then we are caught in Māra's net. The language we use construct our world, the thoughts we harbour weave the net that traps us in this virtual world. We are caught in the gravitation and orbit of the world and its satellites that we have created. [§13]

The Buddha's words are the escape pod from this dark and narrow self-projected world. Our moral virtue is the escape pod, our mindfulness and meditation the fuel and force that propel us out of this world's gravitation, and our wisdom is the well-earned freedom of open space, where the true journey away from Māra begins. This is a figurative way of reflecting on non-self (*anattā*).⁷

1.4 MĀRA AS IGNORANCE. The last line of the Buddha's verse [§14] is especially interesting as it tells us of Māra's weakness. Māra is blinded when we understand and accept non-self. For Māra is constructed by the language of unknowing, and powered by fuel of craving. "Unknowing" or ignorance (*avijjā*) here means almost all that we know are knowledge "of" things and seeking them. This is the knowledge of "having." What we can have are all constructed by our senses. They are necessarily impermanent, but we vainly try to collect and preserve them.

When we truly understand how our senses create our world, then we know that it is really a fleeting moment. We can never "have" the world. Yet, if we see these passing events and our minds see them for what they are, then we "are" those moments. We are at peace with them. This is the joy of "being." We have freed ourselves from Māra's 6-dimensional virtual world of suffering and falseness. [§15]

1.5 BLINDING MĀRA.

1.5.1 The closing section of the **Ariya Pariyesanā Sutta** (M 26)—also known as the Pāsa,rāsi Sutta, the Discourse on the Pile of Traps⁸—first defines the 5 cords of sensual pleasures, that is, the 5 physical sense-experiences and their respective desirable feelings are said to be "a pile of snares," set by Māra to trap us and keep us trapped in his realm, that is the sense-world.

⁷ On non-self, see **Is there a soul?** SD 2.16 (7).

⁸ M 26,31-43 = SD 1.11.

The Sutta then explains how we can avoid these traps, that is, by meditating to attain any of the “8 dhyanas,” that is, the 4 form dhyanas and the 4 formless attainments. After describing each of them, the Buddha declares that a “monk” (synecdoche for a meditator) “is said to have blinded Māra, to be unseen by Māra the bad one’s eye.”⁹

1.5.2 Māra is *blinded by dhyana*. “Māra is made blind, finds no foothold” (*andham akāsi māraṃ apadam*) in dhyana.¹⁰ While in dhyana we are no more dependent on the physical senses or external sense-bases, and to that extent (at least temporarily), we are beyond Māra’s reach. The reason for this is simple enough to appreciate: a dhyana is so profoundly blissful that we feel total at peace right here and now (no more suffering), as stated in **the Samādhi Bhāvanā Sutta** (A 4.41).¹¹ This blissful stillness clears our minds so that, on emerging from dhyana, we can easily see true reality, what our senses often filter or distort. This is a happy suprasensory being, a truly extrasensory joy, a joy independent of the senses.

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The Discourse on the Farmer

S 4.19

1 At Sāvattḥī.

Now at that time, the Blessed One was instructing, inspiring, rousing and gladdening¹² the monks with a talk connected with nirvana.

And the monks were all ears, attentively, intently applying all their mind, listening to the Dharma.¹³
[115]

Māra intervenes

2 Then it occurred to Māra the bad one,

“This recluse Gotama is instructing, inspiring, rousing and gladdening the monks with a talk connected with nirvana.

And the monks are all ears, attentively, intently applying all their mind, listening to the Dharma.

What now if I were to approach the recluse Gotama to spread blindness?”¹⁴

3 Then Māra the bad one assumed the form of a farmer, bearing a large plough on his shoulder, holding a long goad, his hair disheveled, wearing hempen garments, his feet smeared with mud, and appearing before the Blessed One, said this,¹⁵

⁹ M 26,34-43 = SD 1.11.

¹⁰ M 25,11-12/1:159 f, 26,34-42/174 f.

¹¹ A 4.41/2:45,1-6 = SD 24.1. On the Buddha’s “heavenly couch” (the dhyanas), see **Venāga,pura S** (A 3.63,5.1/-1:182 f), SD 21.1.

¹² *Dhammiyā kathāya sandasseti samādapeti samuṭṭejeti sampahamseti*: M 1:176×2, 177×2, 2:123×4, 139×2, 140, 3:189; S 1:112×2, 113×3, 114, 189, 190, 192×2, 210, 2:280×3; A 3.90/1:236, 237, 4.48/2:51×3, 9.4/4:358; U 74×2, 80×3, 81. These 4 qualities are, in fact, the sixth or last of the ideal skills of a Dharma speaker: see **(Dhamma Desaka) Udāyī S** (A 5.159/3:184), SD 46.1; **Kathā,vatthu S** (A 3.67/1:197-199), SD 46.11; & on the Buddha’s treatment of visitors, see **Mahā Suññata S** (M 122), SD 11.4 (4).

¹³ *Te ca bhikkhū aṭṭhi,katvā manasi,katvā sabba,cetasā samannāharitvā ohita,sotā dhammaṃ suṇanti*.

¹⁴ *Yan,nūnāham yena samaṇo gotamo ten ’upasaṅkameyyam vicakkhu,kammāyāti*. The phrase **vicakkhu,kammāya** (Skt *vicakṣu,karma*, Mvst 3.416; Lalv 490) comes from *vi-cakkhu*, “without eyes” + *kamma*, “making” (S 1:111, 118), meaning “for the purpose of making (them) eyeless, blind, confused.”

¹⁵ *Atha kho māro pāpimā kassaka,vaṇṇaṃ abhinimminivā mahantaṃ naṅgalaṃ khandhe karitvā dīghaṃ pācana,yaṭṭhim*¹⁵ [Ce Ee Se so; Be *dīgha,pācana,yaṭṭhim*] *gahetvā haṭa,haṭa,keso sāṇa,sāṭī nivattho*¹⁵ *kaddama makkhi-tehi pādehi yena bhagavā ten ’upasaṅkami, upasaṅkamtivā bhagavantam etad avoca*

- 4 “Perhaps, you’ve seen some oxen, recluse.”
 5 “What, bad one, have I to do with oxen?”

Māra tries to spread blindness

- 6 “**The eye** is surely mine, recluse;
 forms are mine;
 eye-contact and its consciousness-base¹⁶ are mine.¹⁷
 Where, ascetic, can you go to escape me?
The ear is surely mine, recluse;
 sounds are mine;
 ear-contact and its consciousness-base are mine.
 Where, ascetic, can you go to escape me?
The nose is surely mine, recluse;
 smells are mine;
 nose-contact and its consciousness-base are mine.
 Where, ascetic, can you go to escape me?”
The tongue is surely mine, recluse;
 tastes are mine;
 tongue-contact and its consciousness-base are mine.
 Where, ascetic, can you go to escape me?
The body is surely mine, recluse;
 touches are mine;
 body-contact and its consciousness-base are mine.
 Where, ascetic, can you go to escape me?”
The mind is surely mine, recluse;
 thoughts are mine;
 mind-contact and its consciousness-base are mine.
 Where, ascetic, can you go to escape me?”

The Buddha responds

- 7 “**The eye** is indeed yours, bad one;
 forms are yours;
 eye-contact and its consciousness-base are yours.
 But, bad one, where there is no eye, no forms, no eye-contact and its consciousness-base,
 you cannot go there, bad one!¹⁸
 8 **The ear** is indeed yours, bad one;
 sounds are yours;

¹⁶ *Cakkhu, samphassa, viññāṇ’āyatanam*. Comy resolves this as *cakkhu, viññāṇena sampayutto cakkhu, samphasso pi viññāṇ’āyatanam pi*, “eye-contact associated with eye-consciousness and the consciousness-base.” Comy adds that “eye-contact” (and the other contacts, except mind-contact) implies all the mental phenomena associated with consciousness. The “consciousness-base” implies all types of consciousness arising in the respective door, beginning with advertent consciousness (*āvajjana, citta*). In the mind-door, “mind” (*mano*) is the mind-continuum (*bhavaṅga, -citta*) together with advertent; “mental phenomena” are the mental objects (*ārammaṇa, dhammā*); “mind-contact” is the contact associated with the life-continuum (*bhavaṅga*) and advertent; and the “consciousness-base,” the impulsion (*javana, citta*) and registration consciousness (*tad-ārammaṇa, citta*) (SA 1:180). These explanations are from the Abhidhamma tradition: See **The unconscious**, SD 17.8b (5.1.3) & **Nimitta & anuvyanjana**, SD 19.14 (2).

¹⁷ Māra’s threats here allude to a wordplay on *go, cara*, which means “cattle pasture” as well as the “sense-fields.” Hence, Māra’s disguise as a farmer or ploughman (*kassaka*), who uses cattle to do his work. See Sn:N 141 f n26-27. See Intro (1) & *gavesanā*, SD 43.10 (1.2.3), esp (1.2.3.2).

¹⁸ *Agati tava tattha pāpima*.

ear-contact and its consciousness-base are yours.

But, bad one, where there is no ear, no sounds, no ear-contact and its consciousness-base,
you cannot go there, bad one!

9 “**The nose** is indeed yours, bad one;

smells are yours;

nose-contact and its consciousness-base are yours.

But, bad one, where there is no nose, no smells, no nose-contact and its consciousness-base,
you cannot go there, bad one! **[116]**

10 **The tongue** is indeed yours, bad one;

tastes are yours;

tongue-contact and its consciousness-base are yours.

But, bad one, where there is no tongue, no tastes, no tongue-contact and its consciousness-base,
you cannot go there, bad one!

11¹⁹ “**The body** is indeed yours, bad one;

touches are yours;

body-contact and its consciousness-base are yours.

But, bad one, where there is no body, no touches, no body-contact and its consciousness-base,
you cannot go there, bad one!

12 **The mind** is indeed yours, bad one;

thoughts are yours;

mind-contact and its consciousness-base are yours.

But, bad one, where there is no mind, no thoughts, no mind-contact and its consciousness-base,
you cannot go there, bad one!

(Māra:)

13 *Yam vadanti mama idan'ti²⁰
ye vadanti maman'ti ca
ettha ce te mano atthi
na me samaṇa mokkhasīti.*

That which they say, “It’s mine!”
and those who speak of mine,
if this is their mind here,
they are not free from me, recluse!

(The Blessed One:)

14 *Yam vadanti na taṃ mayham
ye vadanti na te aham
evaṃ pāpima jānāhi
na me maggam pi dakkhasīti.*

That which they, “It’s not mine!”
who speak not of “I,”
know this, bad one,
you see neither them nor my path!

15 Then Māra the bad one, saying, “The Blessed One knows me! The well-farer [sugata] knows me!” sorrowful, downcast, disappeared right there.

— evaṃ —

130910; 130913; 131218

¹⁹ Ee (PTS) missed this numbering.

²⁰ Ce so; Be Ee Se *mama-y-idan*.